

Thought for the Week 14th February 2021

READING 1 John 3: 1-24 English Standard Version Anglicised

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practises lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practises righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practise righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers,^[c] that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

SERMON God's Valentine to Us

Today, 14th February is known as Valentine's Day which is celebrated as a day of Love. For some it is a day for those who are desperate to try to win the affection of another male or female by enticing them with fattening gifts. For others it is a day for remembering one's vows of love to one another. My wife will readily tell you that I am not the greatest romantic in the world. She reminded me the other day that I only gave her flowers once on Valentine's Day. It was possibly the first year after we were married and she was delighted, that is until she found out that some pupils in the school in which I was teaching at that time were making special Valentine's Day cards with flowers arranged in them as a project and they had threatened to tell on me if I refused to buy one for my wife!

Today is of course properly known as **Saint** Valentine's Day. There is some uncertainty as to who exactly Valentine was. There are three official canonised saints named Valentine or Valentinus. One story is that Valentine was a priest in third century Rome. The Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than ones who were married so he forbade young men of military age to marry. Valentine ignored the law and continued marrying young couples and his refusal to follow the edict cost him his life. Another legend says that another priest named Valentine was to be martyred he sent a letter to a young woman that had visited him. He signed it, "Your Valentine"

According to church tradition St. Valentine was a priest near Rome in about the year A.D. 270. At that time the Roman Emperor was imprisoning Christians for not worshipping the Roman gods. During this persecution Valentine was arrested. Some say he was arrested for helping Christians escape prison. During his trial they asked Valentine what he thought of the Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury. Of course, Valentine said they were false gods and that the God that Jesus called Father was the only true God. So, the Romans threw him in prison for insulting their gods. While in prison Valentine continued to minister. He witnessed to the guards. One of the guards was a good man who had adopted a blind girl. He asked Valentine if his God could help his daughter. Valentine prayed and the girl was given her sight. The guard and his whole family, 46 people, believed in Jesus and were baptized. Because these people had come to know Jesus, Valentine praised God right there in his prison cell. When the emperor heard about this, he was furious that Valentine was still making converts even in prison, so he had him beheaded.

We think of today as a day to celebrate love, but what exactly is love? With just one word in the English language it can mean different things in different contexts. In the same way that today coffee culture has a sophisticated vocabulary for different kinds of coffee – you can have a cappuccino, an espresso, a latte or a macchiato, the ancient Greeks solved had up to 6 different terms for this word, and the New Testament uses three of them. *Philia* which means deep friendship and is the root word for Philadelphia, sometimes known as "the city of brotherly love". The second Greek term is *Eros*, the root word for our word erotic, is sexual love between a man and woman, and never meant anything else. Yet what does that have to do with Valentine's Day and this passage? All the words for Love are encompassed in the third Greek word.

The word most used in the New Testament, and the one John uses several times in the passage we read is *Agapao*. In secular Greek this word refers to unconditional, selfless love, and so is the perfect term for God's love for us. We sinful human beings have done nothing to deserve it, yet God gives his love generously and unreservedly. As John puts it in verse 1: *"How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* And think also of that well-known verse of Paul's writings Romans 8:39 where he says that neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's *agapao* love. Mirroring God's *agape* love for us, John is here emphasising to his readers that our love of God must mean total commitment and total trust on our part. John was no doubt remembering the words of Jesus he had recorded in his gospel account, chapter 13:34-35: *"I give you a new command. Love one another. You must love one another, just as I have loved you. If you love one another, everyone will know you are my disciples."*

Jesus took previous sayings from the Old Testament: Love God; love your neighbour; do unto others as you would have the do unto you, however, he did so in a startlingly exclusive and unconditional way that encompasses total loyalty to God alone. Not divided between priorities, it means that God comes first. And so John says in verse 4-6. *"Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him."*

And then in verse 7 he goes on: *“Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.”*

Our Love for God should be focused on keeping his commandments. But if we have any other motive, then it is not done out of LOVE. If we do not love God enough to keep his commandments, how can we say then that we are Children of God? Pure love (agapao) is unconditional, we then do what is right because it is right. Jesus also told us that love of neighbour accompanies love of God (Mt 22:39) and John re-emphasises this strongly in verses 11-15: *“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”*

Despite the fact that the world around us may hate us we are still to show that selfless, unconditional love that God has for us. Maybe John was thinking of how Jesus illustrated this vividly in his story of the Good Samaritan when he wrote verses 17:18: *“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”* John had seen with his own eyes in action in the life of Jesus. The gospel writers frequently speak of Jesus’ emotions saying he was filled with compassion. Compassion is a fruit of this agape love. Compassion is being filled with sympathy or pity. But it is not enough to have pity or sympathy, love requires action. Jesus had compassion and did he something about it. Whether it was healing, feeding, mercy or forgiveness, Jesus took his compassion to the next level. God had compassion on us human beings in our fallen state and did something about. Agapao shows emotion and requires action from us too.

But the action is not limited to just our neighbours, it definitely includes love of enemies (Mt. 5:43-44). This love of God’s new people which they show not merely to one another but even to those of the present age who persecute them. Jesus had compassion on all of us, he had mercy on our condition to become like one of us. But then his love compelled him to become our sacrifice. As Peter puts it in chapter 3 of his first letter: *“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”* In his great compassion and love, Jesus did what was necessary to bring us back to God, he paid the price once for all time. His death on the Cross is sufficient for all of us to come back to God. The agapao type of love is completely sacrificial.

We have one Saviour who has proved his love for us, and calls us to share that love with everyone. We are not to do it to gain love, but because we are loved. For this reason, we are God’s valentine to the world, we are his examples of love. If we do what he has commanded **LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR HEARTS AND LOVING OTHERS AS OURSELVES**, then we will be practising agapao love in the world.

Amen.

Sunday 14 February

Moderator

The Moderator's Appeal for help towards the support of some PCI mission partners will provide much needed help in situations of desperate emergency thanks to the generosity of individuals and congregations. Continue to pray for those people living in circumstances of great difficulty and need.

Engaging in worship

Today as we worship, ask God to help us to engage in meeting with him, freeing our minds from distraction and opening our lives to his presence that we might know his touch and power.

Monday 15 February

Naomi Keefe (global mission worker, Brazil)

Pray for children of the Good News Club as they undertake devotional activities at home. Pray for wisdom regarding when to start physical meetings again with the families in the favela. Pray too for the grave Covid situation in Brazil and for the wise distribution of vaccines.

Malawi

Pray for the people of Malawi to be protected from Covid-19, especially the new South African variant, as healthcare provision is stretched. Pray for the work and witness of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.

Tuesday 16 February

Margaret Robertson (deaconess, Elmwood, Lisburn)

Give thanks that even though we are physically apart we are connected by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Pray for guidance and wisdom for Margaret in conversations with people on the phone, especially with those who are facing difficulties and heartache.

Cahir and Fermoy

Pray that phone calls and text messages will encourage church members. Give thanks that God's Word is reaching out through social media to some who would not normally attend services.

Wednesday 17 February

Gary and Mary Reid (global mission workers, Kenya)

Pray for Gary and Mary as they continue their work remotely and record video messages for the church in Olkinyei each week. Pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest and for many more Massai people to come to faith in Christ.

India

Pray for staff and students at Gujarat United School of Theology as they teach / study online, sometimes with internet difficulties. Pray for Rev John Faris (PCI) as he prepares some online talks for the students.

Thursday 18 February

Philip Whelton (Irish mission worker, Arklow)

Pray effective and creative ways will continue to be found to maintain contact with the children and families who attended weekly activities before Covid restrictions. Pray that if it is God's will, Arklow will be able to run a holiday Bible Club this summer in some format.

Carrigart and Dunfanaghy

Pray for these linked congregations in north Donegal which are vacant. Pray for the kirk sessions and members as they seek God's guidance and for Rev Brian Brown, vacancy convener.

Friday 19 February

Social Witness

Pray for our new visiting arrangements, that they may go some way in meeting the needs of residents and families, who have now been separated for ten months and denied that all important hug.

Give thanks that we can now accommodate visiting in many forms; virtual visiting, phone calls, window visiting and visiting behind screens - acknowledging how important they are to residents, family and friends.

Dying with Dignity Bill

Pray for the Oireachtas Committee on Justice as it considers the submissions it has received in relation to the Dying with Dignity Bill, and pray that the legislation would not proceed any further.

Saturday 20 February

General Council

A meeting of the Standing Commission of the General Assembly is scheduled to take place this week. Pray that, in these challenging times, there will be unity of purpose and spirit and that wise decisions will result as the work of PCI moves forward into 2021.